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ABSTRACT

Schools have traditionally been accountable for management of educational programs, while students were held responsible for academic achievement and personal success. Recent reform and restructuring efforts have increased the responsibility of schools for student outcomes. Wisconsin has shifted responsibility for student outcomes to the individual schools. This accountability standard assumes that school performance can be judged by student performance. It was thought that public access to student outcome information would foster school improvement. Two school districts thought to be in full compliance with the accountability standards were studied. The study sought to identify management strategies and conditions that facilitated successful implementation of the performance-disclosure report. Also, districts were evaluated to determine if they were in active or passive compliance and if the goals and objectives published in the reports were reflected in school-site programming. The study found that the accountability standards overall create minimal expectations for districts, and the accountability reporting had only limited influence on education practices. The findings do not support suggestions by policy makers that there are links between accountability reporting and school improvement and responsiveness. Attachments include descriptions of the districts examined and goals and objectives. (Contains 16 references.) (JPT)

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FACT AND FANCY OF WISCONSIN'S ACCOUNTABILITY REPORTING STANDARD

A COMPARISON OF TWO SUBURBAN DISTRICTS

OCTOBER 1991 UCEA PAPER

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Schools have traditionally been accountable for proper management of inputs to educational programs and services, while students were assumed to be responsible for acquiring the skills necessary for academic and personal success. Recent efforts to reform and restructure schooling dramatically change this traditional view of responsibility for student outcomes (Guthrie, Garms, and Pierce, 1988). School-based management, parental choice plans, and accountability reporting standards are all examples of reforms premised on the assumption that responsibility for student outcomes is more appropriately placed with school personnel than with students and their families.

Wisconsin's accountability standard shifts responsibility for student outcomes to individual schools. It is one of the state's twenty standards enacted by the legislature in 1985. Each of the twenty standards promotes one or more of the seven elements of effective schools supported by Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction. The twenty standards are considered an integrated set of minimal expectations brought together for the purpose of making schools more effective for all students (WDPI, 1987).

The accountability standard is premised on the notion that school performance can be readily measured and that student performance on tests is an appropriate measure of school quality. Rather than using test results for student diagnostic purposes (low stakes testing), the standard requires the use of student test results to measure school performance (high stakes testing). The standard broadens the required dissemination of information about schools, emphasizes measurable progress assessments, and requires reporting by individual schools rather than the more traditional consolidated district information.

The construction of the accountability standard was also influenced by a number of other assumptions. The standard inherently assumes that public access to student outcome information and other evidence of progress toward the attainment of educational objectives facilitates school improvement. A sentiment echoed by Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction and the Wisconsin School Public Relations Association in school improvement and performance disclosure report planning guides (DPI, 1989 & 1987 and WSPRA, 1988).

The accountability standard is also predicated on the assumption that public disclosure of performance information will encourage political responsiveness to the schools at the local level. Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction consistently presents the performance disclosure report as a mechanism to enhance communication with staff, parents, and community members

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and as a means to encourage involvement in the schools (DPI, 1989 & 1987). Wisconsin's School Public Relations Association also presents the performance disclosure report as an opportunity for school districts to "tell their stories to the public and, in the process, build support for the schools" (WSPRA, 1988 p.8).

This paper will examine the underlying assumptions of Wisconsin's accountability reporting standard and its implementation in two suburban districts. Accountability reporting, in and of itself, did not substantively alter schooling in the districts examined. Program efforts to achieve published goals and objectives either preceded or were unrelated to the accountability reporting requirements. While implementation of the accountability reporting standard was credited with facilitating some improvements in educational planning and assessment strategies, pre-existing conditions in the districts were observed to be of equal or greater significance in achieving active compliance. Minimal central oversight, the inability to compare across districts, and meager consequences for failure to perform or comply reduces the standard's effectiveness. Conflicts between the assumptions underlying the policy and the realities of education practice limits the standard's ability to facilitate school improvement or encourage political responsiveness.

METHODS AND DATA SOURCES

The study was conducted with the cooperation of the Public Policy Forum, an independent, non-profit organization that conducts research and provides information for citizens and policy-makers in the Milwaukee metropolitan area.

The Public Policy Forum seeks to link business, government, education and community leaders to address common community challenges. It monitors over 100 local governments and school districts in the area.

In addition to an annual report on public schooling, the Public Policy Forum publishes periodic reports on specific schooling issues. In early 1990, the Public Policy Forum published a report assessing the first performance disclosure reports prepared by school districts to fulfill Wisconsin's accountability standard. Of the 34 Milwaukee area district reports examined, about one-third were considered to be complete and in full compliance with the standard.

This study was conducted in two of the districts considered by the Public Policy Forum to be in compliance with the accountability standard. A description of the districts is provide in Attachment A.

The two main purposes of the study were:

1. to identify the management strategies and conditions that facilitated successful implementation of the performance disclosure report;

2. to evaluate if districts were in passive or active compliance; whether the goals and objectives published in the reports were reflected in school-site programming.

The in-person interviews focused on the influence of the performance disclosure report on four areas:

1. the school and community;

2. the decision-making process of the school;

3. internal and external communication;

4. local efforts to improve assessment.

In each district, interviews were conducted with the superintendent and central staff involved in preparing the performance disclosure report. In consultation with the superintendent, a number of individual schools were identified to be analysis sites for specific goals and objectives published.

For each school, a single goal from the performance disclosure report was selected for further study. Goals selected for examination were those less easily measured and quantified. This was done to examine the school/district's ability to address outcome assessment issues. Goals and objectives examined are shown in Attachment B.

For each goal, three teachers or other staff involved in program implementation were interviewed. Overall, in-person interviews were conducted at two high schools, one middle school, and four elementary schools. Forty-five staff were interviewed. Principals and district officers were sometimes interviewed more than once.

INTERVIEW OBSERVATIONS

Observations from the interviews are related to the underlying assumptions of the policy and its ease of implementation.

Underlying Assumptions of the Policy

1. School performance can be readily measured.

The performance disclosure reports were seen as one mechanism among many utilized in each district to communicate with the broader community about progress in the schools. District and school leaders considered the reporting requirements of the policy alone to be insufficient to communicate effectively about school performance.

While the standard emphasizes quantifiable goals and objectives and progress assessment, both districts included less readily measured goals and objectives in the report. The inclusion of these programs was considered an important means to communicate with the community and policy makers about the complexity of the educational endeavor.

The standard's emphasis on measurement and quantification influenced which goals were selected for inclusion in the performance disclosure report. Some goals and objectives were included in the reports because they could be readily quantified rather than because of their importance to school improvement. This does not imply that the goals and objectives were chosen only because they could be readily

measured. In both districts, the number of goals and objectives that existed for the district and individual schools exceeded the three or four that were selected for publication.

2. Student test results measure school quality.

Both teachers and administrative staff were concerned about inappropriate between school and between district comparisons based on achievement test results alone. However, dissemination of the performance disclosure reports did not generate much additional concern among staff in these two districts. In both districts, public access to achievement test results on an aggregate basis had been prior practice. Both interpersonal and more formal mechanisms to explain the factors influencing test score differences had been developed in both districts.

These mechanisms were easily extended to qualify school comparisons within each district.

Typical reasons cited for concern about comparisons were that test scores provide an incomplete picture of the school, failure to regard pre-existing differences in student endowments, the influence of factors beyond the control of teachers on students' test performance, "comparing apples and oranges" because different districts used different tests and testing programs, and concerns about "teaching to the test".

Concern about inappropriate comparisons was most strongly expressed in the district that used a single performance disclosure report to present all individual schools. In this report, graphic presentation of test results appeared on facing pages for two similar schools. Teachers in this district felt that this presentation encouraged inappropriate comparisons because the reports were too brief to explain factors affecting the test results. Also, the close proximity of the graphic presentations focused attention on small differences in test scores that teachers felt were not really meaningful.

One effect of accountability reporting in other locations has been increased sensitivity to comparisons resulting from intense media coverage. Those interviewed in Wisconsin did not indicate that media interest or coverage altered as a result of implementing the performance disclosure report.

3. Public access to student outcome information encourages political responsiveness.

Both districts used a variety of formal and informal strategies to increase parent and community involvement in the schools but the performance disclosure report was not perceived to have encouraged involvement to any great degree.

Dissemination strategies for the performance disclosure reports were different in the two districts. The smaller district prepared multiple reports, one for each school, and disseminated the appropriate report to all student families in each school. The reports were also available to others in the community at public locations; e.g. the town

hall and libraries. The larger district, using a single report that included all individual school results, disseminated the report to all student families and direct mailed a copy of the report to all community residents.

While all parents in both districts received the reports, no teacher reported ever having a question or concern directed to them about the performance disclosure report. Principals and district leaders did receive some questions about the reports but not in great numbers. The district that direct mailed their performance disclosure report to all residents and school families reported more citizen initiated contacts than the district that did not direct mail reports to all residents.

Teachers indicated that they consistently read the reports to get information about other schools, but did not use them in parent contacts. Teachers found parents more interested in their own student's outcomes than in school results.

Interest in the published goals and objectives was generated when district and school leaders used the performance disclosure report to communicate with parent and community groups. In these settings, questions were generated by the report's content. Both principals and central officers indicated that the performance disclosure report was a useful vehicle for community group presentations.

District and school leaders suggested that the majority of parental involvement centered on specific student concerns and participation in support of school climate at their own child's school. Some parents were involved on school boards and committees concerned with broader issues regarding schooling in the community. However, this participation was more difficult to solicit and sustain.

While community members at large were involved in schooling in a variety of formal and informal mechanisms, political responsiveness or citizen initiated contacts were relatively infrequent occurrences. Periods of community activism were usually associated with specific issues, most commonly student behavior in the community or financial issues.

4. Public access to student outcome information facilitates school improvement.

   A. Assessment Strategies

      District leaders indicated that performance disclosure reporting facilitated school improvement by more closely coupling goals and objectives with assessment. However, district leaders and teachers also indicated that the performance disclosure report was only one of a number of influences necessitating a broader definition of assessment.

      In both districts, significant efforts are underway to expand assessment strategies and improve public reporting of student and program achievement results. Outcome-based educational strategies

are being explored in one district and implemented in the other district. Student portfolio assessment is another strategy being developed and expanded in one of the districts.

B. District and School Decision-making

No substantial changes in decision making resulted from implementation of the accountability standard. District and school leaders indicated that publication of only three or four goals in the performance disclosure report helped focus effort and resources at all organizational levels. However, the perception that there were too many goals tiered within the organization persisted.

Within overall district priorities, each district used a "bottom-up" information gathering process to identify school goals and objectives and used this information as input to the development of district goals and objectives for the period. The larger district had more documentation about the planning process than the smaller district although the general planning process and decision-making structure was similar in both districts.

While decision making and planning processes were oriented to encourage involvement at all levels of the organization, neither district could be considered to have fully implemented school-based management at the time of this study.

Considerable variety was observed in the structure of decision making in individual schools. The high schools and middle schools were more structured than the elementary schools. Surveys were used to solicit suggestions from teachers and department meetings and department head meetings were all input mechanisms in the high schools and the middle school.

In the elementary schools, the process was less formalized and less structured. In the smallest elementary school there were no formal meetings at all. The principal in this school solicited information from teachers through direct conversation. In another elementary school, the principal was in the process of developing a structure to formalize the goal and objective development process.

The structure would clarify the roles of a school advisory council and define a number of building committees.

C. Teacher Involvement in Decision-making

In all but one school, teachers felt their input about goals and objectives was genuinely desired. The decision process to define school goals and objectives was generally viewed by teachers to be consensual although all teachers in both districts reported that final decisions about report content rested with the principals and district leaders.

At one school, teachers felt the program examined would never have been selected for inclusion in the performance disclosure

report if they had not solicited district support to influence their principal. This school demonstrates that positive teacher perceptions about inclusion in decision making are fragile. This school had undergone a number of changes in mission and organization structure in its recent past. These changes, while unrelated to the specific program under examination, contributed to the teachers' sense that implementing "their" program was inhibited by the school's principal being preoccupied with implementing district initiated changes to the school.

The degree of teacher involvement in goal and objective planning was also affected by organizational changes at another school. Teachers at this school indicated a high level of commitment to the program under examination and active involvement in decision making when the first performance disclosure report was prepared. Since that time, a variety of additional district demands had been placed on the school and changes in principal leadership had occurred. The teachers at this school indicated uncertainty about both the program's future, as well as their continued meaningful involvement in goal and objective development for the school.

This uncertainty proved to be well founded. With minimal teacher involvement, the new principal developed the goals and objectives for the performance disclosure report in preparation at the time of the study. This reduction in teacher involvement in decision-making resulted from conflicting demands rather than from the principal's intent or management/educational philosophy. The principal suggested that this unilateral action, while perceived to be unavoidable, was not a good way to "get off on the right foot" with the faculty.

D. Commitment to Program

Teacher and staff commitment to programs was enhanced by the inclusion of the program as a school goal in the performance disclosure report. Inclusion was generally viewed by teachers as recognition of a program's importance.

Programs selected for inclusion in the performance disclosure report were also supported by school or district in-service and release time for program activities.

EASE OF IMPLEMENTATION

The interviews also identified a number of factors that facilitated the implementation of the accountability standard in the two districts.

1. The performance disclosure report was not perceived to be a major change in either district.

Public relations, management by objectives, and accountability for results had been emphasized for a period of years prior to the accountability mandate in both districts. As a result, the reporting

provisions of the mandate presented more of a pragmatic challenge than a new management or educational philosophy.

2. The performance disclosure report was attributed more to the educational philosophy of district and school leaders than to state mandates.

Teachers viewed accountability reporting to be consistent with the management philosophy of principals and district leaders. While the inclusion of school testing results was attributed to the mandate, teachers felt that the importance of goal and objective planning and public reporting of school progress would have occurred even if the state mandate had not existed.

In one district, changes in district leadership coincided with dissemination of the first performance disclosure report. Some teachers in this district viewed the current goal and objective and assessment strategies a relaxation of prior reporting requirements. Previously, the student testing program had required annual testing early in the fall of each year. Teachers in the district considered this practice to be burdensome for both students and teachers. In addition, they considered the timing of the testing to be particularly onerous since the testing was conducted so early in the school year that results could not reasonably reflect their influence over student achievement to any degree. Teachers also felt that the frequent testing early in the semester created one of two negative outcomes. The testing generated student anxiety, particularly in the early grades, that was difficult for teachers to overcome during the rest of the year. Alternatively, students became immune or bored with the tests and no longer applied themselves to the task.

3. District/school leaders and teachers demonstrated mutual respect.

4. District and school leaders were considered credible and accomplished by teachers.

Generally, district leaders and teachers in these districts viewed each other with respect. In almost all cases, teachers regarded principals and district leaders as credible. They frequently related leader credibility to their personal educational accomplishments and their willingness to involve teachers in decision-making at the district and school level.

5. Teachers were not burdened with report preparation.

Physical preparation of the annual disclosure reports occurred at the central office in both districts. Initial text preparation at the school level, was done by principals or office staff. Teachers, while valuing opportunities to influence goal and objective decisions and participate in program implementation, were thankful to be relieved of report preparation. Teachers felt they could rely on their principals and the district to accurately reflect their input in the reports.

6. Reliance on local discretion in implementation and compliance

The accountability standard allows local districts considerable discretion in achieving compliance which eased implementation.

The report format and means of dissemination are locally determined. Single reports with individual school results presented meet the standard as do a number of reports for each school in a district. Local districts can send the reports home with students, mail them to community residents and school families, publish results in a community media, or place report copies in public resource areas such as city halls or libraries.

The content, choice and number of goals and objectives published are also determined by local districts.

While Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction guidelines suggest that staff, parents, and community members be involved in the goal and objective planning process, how and when to involve parents and community members is also determined by the local district.

The choice of testing instruments is locally determined. As a result of this local discretion, test results are not comparable between districts.

Consequences of failure to comply or failure to perform are also primarily determined at the local level. Although considered during development of administrative rules related to the accountability standard and then later rejected, submission of the performance disclosure reports to Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction is not required on an annual basis. Standards auditing is accomplished once every five years or if a complaint is received. Noncompliance may be appealed by local districts.

While both districts examined tied progress toward goals and objectives to principal evaluation, there is no requirement to do so.

DISCUSSION

While suggesting that the mandated standards constitute a "Blueprint for Excellence", Wisconsin's Department of Public Instruction also recognizes that the standards overall create minimal expectations for districts. It has been suggested that the effect of mandated minimal performance standards is to create a floor beneath poor performing districts. While this floor may pressure poor performers to change, more successful districts are not expected to be significantly challenged by such mandates (Cibulka, 1990).

Within this context, the finding that the accountability reporting standard, in and of itself, had only limited influence on educational practice in these districts was not unexpected. The districts examined were considered to be at least passively, if not actively, in compliance with the standard. Neither district was considered to be an overall poor performer when a number

of available measures were considered. The study's focus on a single standard among twenty also reduced the likelihood that significant changes would be attributed to the standard's implementation.

It does not appear that the relationship between accountability reporting and school improvement is as direct as policy makers and central authorities have assumed. The study suggests that accountability reporting did facilitate the development of a clear mission and school action plans and focused effort and resources on a limited number of goals. However, the problem of too many goals persisted in both districts. Other school improvement efforts were unrelated to the accountability standard.

The finding that pre-existing conditions were of equal or greater significance in achieving active compliance with the accountability reporting standard is consistent with the literature on innovation and change in organizations (Elmore & McLaughlin 1988, Pincus 1979, & Rogers 1983). This literature suggests that substantial change requires substantial time, that the perceived credibility of leaders is an important influence in the implementation process, and that mechanisms to inform and persuade program participants about change are essential to successful implementation.

Accountability for results had been an education/management theme for a period of years in both districts prior to the standard's inception. The standard was generally perceived to be compatible with values and beliefs cultivated over considerable time in the districts. Similarly, the active involvement and support of teachers and school leaders in the specific programs examined was also garnered over considerable time frames.

The importance of credible leadership and mutual respect among participants in the change process was also found to be a significant factor in the development of active teacher support for specific program goals and objectives and in the implementation of a planning process that emphasized accountability.

Substantial support in the form of district and school site in-service was provided in both districts to facilitate the implementation of new initiatives.

The educators in these two districts contested the assumptions that school performance is readily measured or that student performance on tests is an appropriate measure of school quality. While the expressed concerns about measuring educational outcomes may sound like time-worn excuses, both districts were actively involved in efforts to improve student assessment and to develop alternative outcome measures. The conflict between the measurement assumptions made by policy makers and the realities of educational outcome assessment are not likely to be easily resolved however actively these districts engage in the improvement of student assessment and alternative outcome strategies. The development of school effectiveness models that incorporate both input and student outcome measurement represents a significant challenge to educators and policy makers alike (Odden, 1990, Hanushek, 1986). Until these relationships are further developed, it is unlikely that policy makers will fully realize the shift in responsibility for student outcomes implicit in accountability reporting policies.

The underlying assumption of the standard that a relationship between accountability reporting and increased political responsiveness exists was not supported. While the role of information is critical to the theoretical constructs and literature on economics, political science, and public policy analysis, information as a source of knowledge or power is only one aspect of participation models. A variety of other factors such as socioeconomic status, education, and community size and structure are all known to influence both the extent and efficacy of citizen participation. The relative importance of these variables is unresolved (Brown 1982, Sharp 1984, Thomas 1982, Vedlitz 1980, & Verba and Nie, 1972).

Competing rationales for accountability reporting are frequently left unresolved as accountability reporting policies are constructed and the intended uses and users of the information are not always well-defined (Cibulka, 1990). Wisconsin's accountability reporting standard demonstrates these ambiguities.

While parents are clearly one of the intended recipient groups, local discretion in dissemination of the report and minimal central oversight allows the role of community members and central education officers to remain obscure.

Recipients of the information are unable to make comparative judgements about school performance limiting their ability to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of school operations and programs.

These factors coupled with minimal central oversight and meager consequences for failure to comply or perform suggest that, while the intent of policy makers may have been to create a "high stakes" environment, the reliance on local discretion in Wisconsin's accountability reporting standard is resulting in a "low stakes" reality.

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ATTACHMENT A

DISTRICTS EXAMINED

Two suburban districts that submitted exemplary performance disclosure reports in the first year of the accountability standards' implementation.

District 1:

A remote Milwaukee suburb with approximate enrollment of 3,100, six schools, and faculty size of about 200. There are four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. Two elementary schools and the high school were examined.

District 2:

A near suburban district with approximate enrollment of 7,000, thirteen schools, and faculty size of about 500. There are nine elementary schools, two middle schools, two high schools and two off-site educational programs at medical facilities. Two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school were examined.

Both districts are participants in an urban/suburban transfer program. Non-resident enrollments in the two districts are similar.

ATTACHMENT B

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES EXAMINED

Elementary Schools:

School 1:

GOAL: Develop student progress in the strategy approach to reading.

OBJECTIVES: Students will increase in their ability to construct meaning from print.

Students will increase in their ability to apply strategies to learn in a wide variety of situations.

Students will use a wide variety of strategies in every area of the curriculum.

School 2:

GOAL: Increase student proficiency in reading skills as applied across the curriculum.

OBJECTIVES: Students will use a variety of reading strategies in every subject area.

Students will experience a variety of literary forms and elements.

School 3:

GOAL: Develop a pilot program to improve work study skills in referencing, organization, and test taking.

OBJECTIVES: Not explicitly stated.

School 4:

GOAL: Four teachers, the guidance counselor, and the principal will work with children who were identified by their teachers as being at-risk because of poor attendance, poor school behavior and/or lack of academic achievement to help these students to improve in the three areas. We will be known as the support team.

OBJECTIVES: Not explicitly stated.

ATTACHMENT B

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES EXAMINED

Middle School:

School 1:

GOAL: Students will become more efficient lifelong learners by developing organizational skills and good study habits.

OBJECTIVES: Staff members will design and implement a schoolwide developmental study skills program.

Students will demonstrate appropriate study skills.

High Schools:

School 1:

GOAL: Develop a short and long range plan to provide services for students identified as gifted and talented.

OBJECTIVES: Not explicitly stated.

School 2:

Improve student performance in the area of learning skills.

OBJECTIVES: Teachers will coordinate efforts with the Middle School in the instruction of learning skills.

Teachers will target specific learning skills to be taught in all departments and in all classes.

Teachers will enlarge the scope of the tutoring program.